Where We Go From Here
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Based on Philippians 3:12-14, Paul Presses Onward …

Paul writes from prison, having been detained unjustly for his civil disobedience in The Way of Jesus. The Philippians have rallied to his cause, sending him food and clothing, praying for his release with their hearts and their phone calls and their pocketbooks. Paul responds with gratitude and courage and encouragement for the Philippians, as they continue the ministry without his physical presence:

I have not yet become
a completely just person [Paul says].
Wholeness in its fullness
is a goal beyond my reach.

Still, I keep trying to get it right,
if, for no other reason,
than Jesus — The Anointed One —
has gotten ME right.

Siblings, even in my own self-analysis,
I have NOT gotten all of it right.

But one thing I have gotten right:
I am not staying stuck in what has been.
I am putting all of my energy into what comes next.

The point of it all is The Way of Jesus. Period.
That is the goal I pursue with everything I am.
That is the prize.

If you have a really good memory, you may recall I introduced you to the story of Pastor Guillermo a couple of years ago.

Pastor Guillermo was a colleague of mine in upstate New York, who served a small Spanish-speaking mostly immigrant congregation. This immigrant Spanish-speaking congregation met in the building of a former Presbyterian church. The Presbyterian congregation had declined and then closed and its remaining members joined the congregation I was serving at the time. In the meantime, we converted the building into a community center with a mission to serve the most intentionally left behind part of the city.

Boy was that part of the city intentionally left behind! Historic redlining led to decades of underinvestment. Infrastructure development to support the rest of the city introduced a major highway cutting the neighborhoods in that part of the city in half, establishing a food desert. Hyper policing run amok killed three unarmed Black men within the five and a half years I served in ministry there.

On the off chance any of us are basking in a partisan bliss this particular Sunday, I need to point out the policies promoting systemic poverty and structural racism in that particular part of the city were all implemented and supported by Democratic lawmakers. It turns out intentionally leaving the most vulnerable behind is a bipartisan problem.

The Church fought back. And by "The Church," I mean Pastor Guillermo. He insisted his flock emphatically mattered to God, even when it seemed they did not matter to anyone else. He rallied the community to provide for one another, even when provision seemed to be lacking all around them. He made connections with others who cared, and together we got to work in both direct service and advocacy in The Way and Spirit of Jesus in solidarity with those who were suffering most.

Except very few people knew Pastor Guillermo was doing all of that. Because he was undocumented, he kept a very low profile. Instead of standing in the limelight himself, he encouraged the rest of us, in the manner of the apostle Paul, to do our part for justice and wholeness in ourselves and in the world.

The apostle Paul, on the other hand, does not need to keep a low profile. Paul is a citizen of the Roman Empire — the superpower of his time — and he uses the privilege of that citizenship to turn the tables on corruption and collusion and just plain dismissal of those the Empire intentionally leaves behind.

Into a culture that demands worship of Caesar as the very "son of God" and into an economy that gobbles up land for Roman Imperial interests and then calls Caesar "lord and savior" because he passes out free bread made from the grain he stole from subsistence farmers, Paul insists those titles instead belong to a Jewish carpenter from the holler. *Our citizenship*, Paul reminds the Philippians in the verses that follow our Lesson, *is in heaven*, even if you think you carry an American passport. This is not some pie in the sky by and by statement of escapism. This is praying for God's kin-dom to come and God's will to be done *on earth* as it is in heaven. This is *political*! Through *this* citizenship, Paul insists, God is building a new earth, a new economy, a new way of life that is really an old way of life that is really what God intended all along. Reference Mt. Sinai and the Ten

Commandments.

If you have been attending our Bible Study these past couple of months you will recognize this way of life as "Manna Society": *a world where there are no big deals and little deals, no rich and poor, no oppressors and oppressed — where humans live in harmony with all creation, each part living for the good of the whole.*

It sounds great, doesn't it! Who wouldn't sign up for that? This is why Paul is so wildly successful. His message — the message of Jesus — is good news for those who have been intentionally left behind!

But it is a seismic threat to the powers who like things exactly the way they are. Those powers fight back, too. Paul is arrested over and over again for breaking Roman law. He *is* breaking Roman law! The law *requires* emperor worship. Over and over again, Paul lands in jail for the simple reason of pointing to The Way of Jesus as our salvation instead of The Way of Caesar.

Pastor Guillermo was arrested, too, caught up in the mass deportation efforts that flared up eight years ago — practice efforts for what we live with today. Instead of jailing him at the detention center in Albany, where his family could easily visit, he was sent five hours away to western New York. Taking an entire day off of work to visit him seemed impossible for the family, who had no car. Again, The Church stepped up.

In the same way the Philippians rallied for the apostle Paul while he was in prison, The Church in upstate New York rallied for Pastor Guillermo and his family. We gathered food and clothing, we prayed for his release with our hearts and our phone calls and our pocketbooks for his lawyer fees. Thousands of dollars cycled through my Pastor Discretionary Fund on their way to support this family. It felt good to do it. People *wanted* to do it. It gave them some small semblance of agency in the face of a power that wanted nothing more than to crush our spirits and render us impotent.

Like Paul, Pastor Guillermo and his family responded with gratitude and courage and encouragement for those of us continuing the ministry without his physical presence. From the cell of a detention center, Pastor Guillermo sent word he was ministering to others in detention whose faith was crumbling. He challenged us all to keep our eyes on the prize: The Way of Jesus as the goal we pursue with everything we are.

The story does not end well. Like Paul, Pastor Guillermo ultimately succumbed to the powers that be. Guillermo was deported, leaving behind his wife and five children. Paul was eventually executed. There is no happy ending. The good guys do not win in this story. At least not in the way we want them to.

Even so, their words live on.

Friends, we do have a lot to celebrate this week. Believe me, I am celebrating. But, in the words of the apostle

Paul, we have not yet become completely just. For the immigrant families among us, this coming week will be no better than the week that came before. In fact, it will likely be worse. Wholeness in its fullness is beyond our reach.

Still, we must keep trying to get it right if, for no other reason, than Jesus — The Anointed One — has gotten US right.

The Good News for us today is that, while The Church in New York was rallying around Pastor Guillermo, SPC was organizing our Immigrant and Refugee Support Team. In the years that followed, St. Agnes Catholic Community developed an immigrant accompaniment program. Together, we have stories just like Pastor Guillermo's we would love to share. Immigrants in hiding, breadwinners detained and deported, families left behind, all accompanied and supported by those you have commissioned to care in this way.

We just cannot tell you these stories. To do so would put the most vulnerable at risk.

What we *can* tell you is they need our help now more than ever. If Scripture is any witness, imperial power will fight back HARD, directing the worst of its violence toward those with the least power to defend themselves. That is why we must support this Thursday's fundraiser for Mountain State Justice. There are Pastor Guillermos all over West Virginia who still need our help.

Those of us with the power and privilege of citizenship in the world's remaining superpower — especially those of us with White skin in a culture that is still snatching Black and Brown people off the streets with impunity — cannot stay stuck in a system that does so much harm. All of us must put our energy into what comes next. Our true citizenship is in heaven, no matter which superpower passport we hold. Our job is to pursue The Way of Jesus with everything we are.

That is the victory that truly matters.

That is the prize.